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# *Lubitsch's War: Comedy as Political Ploy in* To Be or Not to Be

The traumatic history of war can always only be grasped as a belated representation that references a Real it can never fully touch. War is something we *anticipate* or something we *reflect on*, while those caught up in the fog and noise of actual battle or actual occupation lack the visual and emotional distance necessary for narrative management.[1] Paul Fussell, himself a US veteran of the European campaign, has fruitfully reconceived Freud's distinction between a civilian and a wartime self so as to explain how for both him and his war buddies surviving the horror of war was predicated on imaginary theatricalization. "If killing and avoiding being killed are the ultimate melodramatic actions, then military training is very largely training in melodrama," he recalls. To conceive of oneself as an actor in a grotesque situation allowed the soldier to do things his civilian self would not have been capable of. Fussell adds: "Seeing warfare as theater provides a psychic escape for the participant: with a sufficient sense of theater, he can perform his duties without implicating his 'real' self and without impairing his innermost conviction that the world is still a rational place."[2] Playing the role of soldier allows for a suppression of civilian judgment that is tantamount to relinquishing a critical distance towards one's actions. Furthermore, there can be no true-to-life war film, as Samuel Fuller has noted, and not only because the enormous noise and fog of battle makes the coherent orientation necessary for

1 See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Specters of War: Hollywood's Engagement with Military Conflict* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

2 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 192.

cinematic depiction impossible. Any claim to authenticity would also require that real bullets be shot from behind the film screen. It would need to draw the audience viscerally into the world depicted on screen.[3]

Thus, when it comes to war's cinematic re-imagination by Hollywood entertainment films, both what is *in front* and what is *behind* the screen is problematized. On the one hand, the issue of reference is foregrounded, with the knowledge of actual death hovering around the edges of the film frame. On the other hand, the movement of troops and those sustaining the war effort on screen serves to mobilize the audience in front of the screen as well. As the will for victory, transported by the actors, spills over to an audience only too willing to identify with this passion, any neat distinction between playing and watching is also self-consciously blurred. As I argue in *Specters of War*, the most compelling war films are, therefore, cinematic re-figurations that acknowledge how representing the Real of War is always an *approximation*. If, however, the most forceful way for mobilizing film viewers is by self-consciously pointing to the mediality of cinema itself, the rhetorical and technical diversion this strategy deploys thrives on what can pointedly be called the *affective effect* of cinema's re-imagination of history.[4] While a suspicion regarding the deployment of carnivalesque humor or satire as means for an intervention in war propaganda is justified, the resilient force of Lubitsch's precise comic dramaturgy calls upon one to rethink this position.

The following essay will revisit *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) in the context of the spectacular Hollywood war effort that began in 1941 after the attack on Pearl Harbor, forging an unprecedented bond between the Pentagon and the entertainment business that would last throughout World War II. Special about Lubitsch's own war effort, however, is the fact that he chooses a genre mix, splicing together the tone of sophisticated comedies such as *My Man Godfrey* (1936) or *Nothing Sacred* (1937) (films with which his female star Carole Lombard had come to be identified), with standard anti-fascist thriller narratives. To offer an additional patina of high pathos, he also brings together Shakespeare's grand tragedy *Hamlet* with the disturbing *Comical History of the Merchant of Venice, or Otherwise Called the Jew of Venice*.

3 See Samuel Fuller, *A Third Face: My Tale of Writing, Fighting, and Filmmaking* (New York: Applause Theater and Film Books, 2002).

4 See also Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at US History*, Revised Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2010).



### *The Opening*

Three outrageous scenic moments sustain the rhetorical use of comedy as a means of addressing political tyranny in the first six minutes of the film. Seminal for the appeal made to the audience is that while, on the diegetic level of the film, we are in Warsaw in August of 1939, which is to say in a Europe that is still at peace, the scenes unfolding on screen are located on a set in Hollywood. The year of the film's release is 1942, a historical moment with not only Europe but also the US at war. The framing sets the tone for the dramaturgic ploy of a play within a play. Initially a male voice-over explains, "at the moment, life in Warsaw is going on as normally as ever," while we see people leisurely window-shopping, sitting in street cafés or moving busily along one of the main streets of Poland's capital. Then the narrator's voice becomes excited as he explains, "but suddenly, something seems to have happened. Are those Poles seeing a ghost?" Now pedestrians and drivers are shown arrested in their movements, staring in shocked awe at something we do not yet see. To underscore the suspense, the narrator adds, "Everybody seems to be staring in one direction. People seem to be frightened, even terrified. Some flabbergasted," while the camera captures their astonishment in close-up shots. As more and more people flock to the one place everyone seems to be staring at, the narrator calls out: "Can it be true? It must be true. No doubt." The camera pans rapidly across the shop window of J. Masłowski's delicatessen store, and the voice-over finally explains the mystery: "The man with the little moustache, Adolf Hitler." Then, as the narrator continues with his ruminations by adding, "Adolf Hitler in Warsaw when the two countries are still at peace...," a man looking like the Führer separates himself from the crowd of staring people that has formed behind him and, briefly scanning his audience, begins to walk unconcerned up and down in front of the shop window, with the onlookers forming a semi-circle around him.

Warsaw in *To Be or Not to Be* is, thus, marked from the start as an urban stage, located outside but comparable to the stage of the Polski theater where, as we discover a few moments later, everything began. The excited tone of the voice-over, recalling wartime propaganda shorts the Hollywood audience would have been familiar with after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 6, 1941, gives an urgency to this first audacious moment by splicing fictionality with documentary. The voice draws us emphatically into a scene in which Hitler appears in the midst of a crowd of Poles, to whom his unexpected presence is like the emergence of a ghost. Given the film title's explicit reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we

are implicitly propelled to the parapets of a castle in Elsinore, where everyone is awaiting the invading army of Fortinbras, the adversary of the melancholic Danish Prince. In Lubitsch's film, however, the specter of a terrifying ruler is not returning from his transitory abode in Purgatory, as Hamlet's father does in order to call upon his son to avenge his death and liberate his soul. Rather, the leader has come from the belligerent neighboring country of Germany. This Hitler is installed as an actor, furthermore, not only because he is the object of the crowd he draws but also because the distance they keep to him produces a stage in front of the shop window. Transforming the leader of the NSDAP, of whom everyone is afraid, into an actor debunks his authority even while establishing it.

The second audacious moment splices together a break-down in theatrical illusion with political satire. The narrator goes on to ask, "How did he get here? What happened," only to add, "Well, it all started in the General Headquarters of the Gestapo in Berlin." Seamlessly the camera moves to a set that could be taken for a Hollywood version of this infamous site of torture in an anti-fascist propaganda feature film such as Sherman Scott's *Beast of Berlin* (1939), until the actor Bronski (Tom Dugan), playing the Führer, enters saying "Heil myself." Only once the producer of the play, Dobosh (Charles Halton), gets up in outrage, protesting "that's not in the script," do we recognize that we are on stage in the Polski theater. This battle, we soon realize, is not over geographical territory but over the issue of what genre is appropriate for political propaganda. Bronski insists that even if his joke is not in the script it will "get a laugh," and a fellow actor, Greenberg (Felix Bressart), comes to his rescue. Against the producer's insistence that he isn't interested in hearing any support for Bronski's improvisation, the only actor in the troop who is marked as being Jewish, in turn, insists on giving his reaction (if not his opinion), by supporting the dramaturgic value of laughter. A laugh, he maintains, "is nothing to be sneezed at." Dobosh, however, valiantly maintains that they are putting on a "serious play, a realistic drama. It is a document of Nazi Germany." By turning down Greenberg's intervention and reminding him that he was hired not as a writer but as an actor, the producer/director insists on the unequivocal authority of a script which is not to be tampered with.

Two things are worth taking note of here. In the course of the film narrative, taking liberties with the script is what several of the actors will be compelled to do, because a change in circumstances will force them to deviate from all preset lines of dialogue. Indeed, the happy ending of *To Be or Not to Be* is predicated on skillful improvisation as well as a clever reiteration of classic passages from Shakespearean texts. Also installed is a running joke having to do with what *will* and what *will not* get a laugh. This brings into play the question of who is to be the butt of the joke—the actor himself, the Führer whom he is debunking, or the audience taken by surprise. But it also draws attention to a troubled relation between political appeal and comedy as a genre, in which those who embody unquestionable authority are shown to be playing a role in relation to symbolic interpellation. By adding the line "Heil myself," Bronski's performance of Hitler is one of an actor aware of politics as theater.

The third audacious moment is one Lubitsch would probably not have gotten away with by the end of the '40s and introduces Carole Lombard as Maria Tura, the lady star in this theatrical troupe. While the men are still arguing over the right of an actor to change the script, she suddenly walks on stage wearing a tight, shimmering, silk evening gown. When Dobosh asks her whether this is what she will be wearing for her scene in the concentration camp, she defends her outrageous choice of costume by imagining for the outraged director the tremendous effect it will have, given the contrast between her gorgeous appearance and the grim reality of camp life. "Think of me being flogged in the darkness," she exclaims with relish, "I scream, the lights go on and the audience discovers me on the floor in this gorgeous dress." Once more Greenberg, the spirit of comic relief who will not be kept away, insists that this dramaturgic ploy would garner "a terrific laugh." Against the serious-minded Dobosh, who will be relegated to the sideline once the Nazis actually arrive in Warsaw, Greenberg, together with Maria Tura, will prove to have the better artistic sense after all. At this point in the film narrative, however, the problem of what is effective political critique—documentary realism or satire—is resolved with Bronski ostentatiously leaving the stage. He insists that he knows he looks like Hitler and that he is going to prove it right now by going out on the street in his costume and make-up to see what happens. He is, of course, almost immediately recognized by a young girl who sees through the masquerade. She cautiously pushes through the bemused crowd and approaches Bronski, smiling as she asks for his autograph.

Given that this sequence serves as an introduction to Lubitsch's comedy, the point to bear in mind is that we are called upon from the start to ask what Bronski's sudden departure from the theater and move to a street in Warsaw implies. The emotional and political effect which actors, taking part in an anti-fascist play, will have, is clearly decided not on the stage but on the streets of this city, which is itself installed as a stage. Decisive for this effect, furthermore, is how long a

given performer (in this case Bronski) can pull off the theatrical illusion in a situation in which the line between theater and reality has become blurred. If the young girl is alone in seeing through the trick, she does so because she is a fan of the actor. Everyone else sees only the costume. This inaugural sequence thus allows Lubitsch to comment on Hollywood's star machinery and our willingness to be duped by celebrity performances. On the extradiegetic level, addressed to the audience sitting in the movie theater, this scene, however, also draws attention to the fact that the authority of Hitler as the leader of the Nazi Party is contingent on the plausibility of his performance. Pitting political theater (the documentary play *Gestapo* which this Polish troop is rehearsing) against the theatrical politics which the presence of Bronski's Hitler on the streets of Warsaw anticipates, involves a surplus that troubles all safe distinctions between artistic veracity and the audacious debunking of the authenticity the realism of documentary makes a claim to. Subverting the explicit anti-fascist message doesn't make it less politically forceful but rather more effective.

Excess is at issue when an actor says "Heil myself," or when an actress inappropriately chooses a glamour dress for her concentration camp costume out of vanity, or when a fan undoes the power of theatrical illusion and breaks the invisible wall between audience and stage by walking up to the actor so as to ask for his autograph. And if it is this excess that makes us laugh, comedy wins the first round against Dobosh's serious-minded directorial taste, setting a dialectical game in motion. It is, thus, appropriate to take our cue from the way Greenberg counters the seriousness of his director/producer by arguing that an audacious dramatic gesture will, if nothing else, "get a laugh," so as to interrogate more closely the political space of theater in *To Be or Not to Be*. Representing the resilient spirit of the comic in the face of catastrophe, Greenberg serves as its reflection and correction, and in so doing reveals the ethical dimension to be found in the rhetoric of repetition all comedy is predicated on.

### *War as Vanishing Point of Theatrical Performance*

One must, thus, take note of how the Real of War which the Nazi occupation brings to Poland is bookended by theater. The first scene revolves around the anti-fascist play, *Gestapo*, and the discussion among the producer and his cast as to the value of comedy for political critique. Then, just before the Blitzkrieg sets in, the producer Dobosh is forced to censor his theatrical troupe and exchange a play he fears might displease Hitler for a Shakespearean tragedy. *Hamlet*, however, is also

Polski theater's rehearsal: Maria Tura's (Carole Lombard's) style for the concentration camp.
*To Be or Not to Be*

a play about war, in which, in the final act, Fortinbras, who has been on a bloody campaign in Poland, finally overruns the castle in Elsinore, only to discover that everyone but Horatio is dead. Once the Polski theater is indefinitely shut down by Nazi censorship, occupied Warsaw itself becomes the decisive stage. There, this staunch troupe of actors will play an improvised version of *Gestapo* in the Real, even while they will draw on another Shakespearean text, *The Merchant of Venice*, for the final deployment of theater as subversive weapon. Only at the very end do we return, once more, to *Hamlet*, now performed at a different location, in the land of Shakespeare himself.

How, then, does Lubitsch enact this seminal transition from the theater to the streets of Warsaw as stage, a move anticipated by Bronski's defiant act. First we see an advertisement poster. The announcement of a change in program, as well as the title of the play that will be performed that night, *Hamlet*, only barely covers the much larger poster for the play *Gestapo*, which the director of the Polski theater has been compelled to censor. Then, as the first of several comic repetitions, the pilot Lieutenant Stanislav Sobinski (Robert Stack) walks out on Joseph Tura's (Jack Benny) performance of the monologue "To be or not to be," engendering the latter's outrage at what he considers to be a foul conspiracy against him as an artist and a man. This battle of the sexes is soon, however, interrupted (even if only barely appeased) by the declaration of war, which the members of the Polski theater read about in the evening paper backstage. For the duration of Warsaw's occupation, Nazi crimes put all personal grievances on hold. Joseph, who storms into his wife's dressing room, is successfully stopped in the middle of his tirade against his rival, first by his fellow actors, who inform him that they are at war, and then by the air alarm, forcing everyone to leave the theater.

With the front line running through Poland, the theatrical troupe comes together, united in its battle against this mutual enemy. The need to act against the occupying forces serves unequivocally as their shared cause. The point of Lubitsch's comic spirit is, however, first and foremost to mobilize the American audience to identify with this cause as well; to recognize it as their own, even though they are geographically far away from the European theater of war. In the cellar during this first bomb raid of Warsaw, Joseph is the one to first address the fact that political reality has caught up with all theater. In response to his comment, "Well anyway, we don't have to worry about the Nazi play anymore," the actor Rawitch (Lionel Atwill) notes, "the Nazis themselves are putting the show on, and a much bigger one." The mise-en-scène places Carole Lombard and Jack Benny in the center of the actors and stage hands, sitting on or huddling around the spiral staircase. Visually they form the nucleus in a troupe that is just about to be re-united for a next round of theatricals. They may have lost their theater stage but not their audience. The mise-en-scène places us where the Polish theater audience, watching Joseph Tura as Hamlet, was shown to sit in the previous scene.

As peacetime turns into wartime, these actors transform the world outside the theater into their new stage, mirroring and commenting on the global theater of war the film references. By moving beyond the confines of the Polski theater, they draw their audience—regardless how far geographically it is distanced from them—into their comedy. Noteworthy is the fact that Maria has the last word. She draws yet a further analogy between them and the military forces that have just invaded Warsaw by bleakly noting "there's no censor to stop them." Implicitly, as the theater troupe takes to the streets, there will also be no censor to stop her and her friends. That the Nazi occupation is to be understood as theater is something Lubitsch underscores in the scene that comes immediately after the air raid. We see stock footage of a bombed building collapsing in a rear projection behind the ruins of the burning Warsaw storefronts of the opening scene, all clearly marked as a Hollywood stage set. So as to underscore the theatricality, we hear a melancholic song played by string instruments but no diegetic sound that might reference the actual destruction of a city. The male voice-over recalls the opening sequence, yet raised to a different pitch, it now melodramatically declares that "the curtain has fallen on the Polish drama."

While this commentary continues, we see Greenburg and Bronski walking amongst the props of destruction, the rubble of the bombed city. Once more the camera isolates the poster on the door of the Polski theater, advertising *Hamlet*, only it, too, has been partially torn off. At this point, the narrator's voice stops and Bressart begins to speak, reiterating what Lombard has said in the cellar during the first air raid: "there was no censor to stop them." He is thus positioned as the actor to articulate the double voicing so seminal to Lubitsch's mise-en-scène. What we are shown on screen is not the Real of War, but the effects of destruction the occupying forces have left. We see this collateral damage, furthermore, both as stock footage and as a stage set referencing this stock footage. The actual battle taking place in Europe is what lies behind the theatrical scene that unfolds on screen. The horrible catastrophe thus obliquely invoked is what extends the film screen out towards us, the audience, affectively drawing us into its movement. The Nazi troops that march across the screen as this transitional sequence comes

to an end, are doing so for two sets of spectators—the actors Greenberg and Bronski on screen and the audience in front of the screen.

The rhetorical point regarding the manner in which Lubitsch thus references his cinematic medium is that it renders the Real of War implicitly present, the ground and vanishing point for the comedy of errors about to begin anew. In contrast to the play *Gestapo* which this troupe had wanted to put on in the Polski theater, their improvisation will have only contingency as its censoring agent. The extreme stylization of the transitional sequence serves more as a shield than a cover up. It obliquely points to the horrific catastrophe it can not directly represent. The second version of *Gestapo*, in which, along with Polish actors playing Nazis, real German Nazis take parts (albeit unwittingly), is a genre splice. We return to the gender battle typical for the sophisticated comedy of the '30s and '40s, with a husband and wife using witty conversation to determine, as Stanley Cavell has argued, the terms of marriage as a trope for the meet and happy relation between the nation and its subjects.[5] Even while Maria is playing cat and mouse with her jealous husband Joseph, she takes on the additional role of female spy, using her seductive allure to prevent a real Nazi spy, Professor Siletsky (Stanley Ridges), from delivering the material he has gathered about the Polish underground to the Commander of the Occupation and through him to Berlin. Important for the double voicing the political force of *To Be or Not to Be* is predicated on is thus the way the comedy of errors performed by the Turas and their troupe overwrites the Real of War explicitly invoked in the scene of transition, even while transcoding such anti-fascist propaganda films as *Casablanca*, which came out the same year. At issue is a multiply terraced screening over of the Real of War, implicitly making reference to what it cannot screen directly.

Throughout the comedy of errors that makes up most of *To Be or Not to Be*, the false beard of Professor Siletsky, the Nazi spy pretending to work for British intelligence, keeps popping up so as to gesture towards the comic medium itself. At first it is merely an attitude. The pilot Sobinski, having joined the RAF, immediately becomes suspicious of this older man when he discovers that he has never heard of Maria Tura. Because Sobinski is an ardent fan, he is able to convince the British secret service that no one could have lived in Warsaw in the last few years without having run into this female celebrity. Not knowing her is what proves Siletsky to be offering a false identity of himself, even if his beard is real. Once he has returned to Poland, Sobinski immediately involves Maria in the political theater they must play out in the Real, setting in motion a comedy that gets more complicated with every turn, because the contingency of the events forces them to improvise. In the case of Maria's husband, this causes him to dangerously abandon his role several times when his vanity as an actor or his own jealousy as a husband are at issue. He will not content himself by letting his wife take the lead, as she plays a seductive woman who shows herself to be willing to become a collaborator for the luxury the Nazi brass can offer her. Tura's own ambition as an actor prompts him to design for himself the major role in the repetition of the documentary drama *Gestapo* which they are now putting on in the back room of the Polski theater, disguised to look like the real Gestapo Headquarters in Warsaw.

Tura, having convinced the other actors to kidnap Siletsky so as to steal his documents, finds himself in a theatrical impasse when he discovers that there are copies of these dangerous papers in the professor's trunk in his hotel suite. In the dramatic resolution the film comes up with, the reference to *Hamlet* is again double voiced. In contrast to the mouse trap in Shakespeare's tragedy, clandestine knowledge is not to be brought to light. Rather the secret information about the Polish underground is meant to disappear in darkness forever. Yet the killing happens on stage and places Siletsky in the position of Polonius. As the curtain rises, the actors, who have all rushed into the dark, empty theater in pursuit of the Nazi spy, see him facing his killer. For a brief moment he stands upright, holding his left hand to the wound in his lower body. All the men watch silently in suspense from the bottom of the stage. Then, raising his right hand in the infamous Nazi salute, but without uttering a word, his bleeding body collapses on the floor. In this condensed representation theatrical means are used to spotlight a real political enemy even while turning him into the perfect embodiment of a melodramatic villain. If his dying on stage serves as a reprieve, the lap dissolve which seamlessly moves from an image of the corpse to the suitcase containing the secret documents anticipates a new round of danger but also a new round of comic errors.

The narrative must thus return once more to the issue of false beards. To up the ante not only on Bronski playing Hitler, but also on his wife doing her version of Mata Hari, Joseph adopts two competing roles. Having initially played the Nazi Colonel Ehrhardt during the rehearsals for *Gestapo*, he now decides to take on the guise of the Nazi spy he has watched die on stage. To do so, however, he

5 See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). It is interesting to note that one year earlier, Carole Lombard had played such a part in *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, the only comedy of remarriage Alfred Hitchcock ever made.

needs the dead man's beard. In the decisive scene of disclosure, one of his fellow actors, dressed as a Nazi officer, pulls off the false beard in front of the astonished eyes of the real Colonel Ehrhardt, who had fallen into the mouse trap and been successfully duped by Tura's performance. A sleight of hand, in turn, helps Joseph out of what looks like a hopeless situation. Having found the corpse of the real Siletsky, the Commander of the Gestapo has placed the dead man on a chair in the room next to his office. He then ushers the Polish actor (who is pretending to be this man) into the same room, waiting in the adjourning room to see how he would respond to their counter-trap. Tura, however, proves his own artistic wit by shaving off the beard of his model and re-attaching it with glue.

This ruse proves to be a game with truth and illusion worthy of Shakespeare's Danish prince. To prove that he is, in fact, the real Siletsky, Tura will compel the Nazi Commandant to pull at the beard of the corpse, thus offering ocular proof that the latter (and not he) is the counterfeit. Since logic forbids one to believe that there could be two false beards, Tura's assumed identity as Siletsky cannot be questioned. The appearance of his actor friends, seeking to save him from the hands of the Gestapo, and as such pitting their improvisation against his, undoes the logic, proving that in this carnivalesque world a false beard is not always a false beard. With the Nazis positioned as the duped audience of these theatricals (while we are in the know), the comic repetition sustains the subversive appeal to political action.

### *Greenberg's Shylock*

The culmination of this comedy of errors on the stage of occupied Poland occurs when Dobosh's troupe, having produced an impasse owing to their exaggerated improvisation, is compelled to restage a second play, *Murder in the Opera*, in the Real. If their performance of *Hamlet* over-wrote that of *Gestapo*, it is now Greenberg's Shylock who overwrites everything, above all Joseph Tura's ham performance of Hamlet's monologue. The precision of Lubitsch's comic pathos sustains the three different moments when Felix Bressart speaks parts but never all of Shylock's famous monologue. Indeed, if this play within a play serves to critically reflect on any ludic appropriation of the designation Jew, the allusion to Shakespeare's text also brings with it a decisive shift in tone. Bressart/Greenberg's Shylock serves as a sober counterpoint to the carnivalesque impersonation of Nazis on the part of Joseph Tura (both as spy and as commanding officer) and Bronski (as Hitler at the beginning and the end of the film). His claim, as a Jew, to humanity speaks not only to the urgency of their theatrical play but also marks those moments when acting takes on the authority of an ethical appeal.

The first time Greenberg intones Shylock is backstage during a performance of *Hamlet*, just after Bronski has been chastised by Dobosh for adding lines to the script. Greenberg tries to calm him down by reiterating that he knows his improvisation would have gotten a laugh. He assures his friend that "they can't keep real talent down forever." His insistence that they, as subsidiary actors, simply need to wait for their time to get the big part they deserve, works with a quasi-comic innocence. With childlike glee, Greenberg imagines what it would be like for him to play the Rialto scene and turns to Bronski to assure him, "Shakespeare must have thought of me when he wrote this. It's me." Identifying completely with this role, he begins his recitation: "Have I not eyes? Have I not hands, organs, senses, dimensions, affections, passions." The medium close-up shows us not only the silent film pathos with which Bressart delivers the famous lines, "if you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?" In a reverse shot we also see Bronski, first frozen into admiration, then breaking the illusion by adding, "you'd move them to tears."

There is a note of self-irony in the air because the pathos of the performance is offset by the setting. They are not only behind the stage but also wearing the costumes of a different Shakespeare play. Furthermore, the personal emotion Greenberg gives to his recital, proving that he is, indeed, made for the part, is immediately undercut again as he moves to joking about himself. In response to Bronski's praise, he falls back out of his role and replies, "Instead, I have to carry a spear." Seamlessly the two subsidiary actors have once more moved the tone to farce, complaining about the lowly roles they are forced to play. Then, repeating the beginning of the film with a difference, the script once more returns to Bronski's improvisation of Hitler and the spirit of comedy. Still deep in conversation, he assures Greenberg that he would love to drop the other lead actor, Rawitch, as bad a ham as Joseph Tura, right in the center of the stage, and his friend replies, "that would get a terrific laugh." The shift in tone surprises even themselves.

The second declamation of Shylock follows upon the Blitzkrieg and the closing of the Polski theater. Now, the two subsidiary characters are shoveling snow outside the theater building and Greenberg reduces his recitation to a few lines: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?" His performance is no longer a sign of his pleasurable identification with this theatrical role but rather an identification of the plight

of the Polish people with the suppression of a Venetian Jew, standing in for all of Europe's Jewry. The tone is now one of nostalgia, and yet, typical for the double voicing so seminal to this film, is also a shift back into the comic. Bronski repeats his praise, only now he says, "What a Shylock you would have been." While the possibility of celebrity is now spoken in the past tense, Greenberg's response once more breaks the tragic pathos. With a touch of exaggerated histrionics he again recalls (now also in the past tense), "All I had to do was to carry a spear." As the camera moves back, Bronski nods in agreement with this shared memory: "I wonder if we'll ever carry a spear again." This invocation of the past also serves an ideological purpose. It seeks to imagine a future based on the success of the current war effort taking place on screen but also one Lubitsch's own film self-consciously seeks itself to support. The scene segues into images of the Polish underground committing acts of sabotage, while the male voice-over, in contrast to the tempered voices of these two actors, is invigorated by anti-fascist furor. By including documentary stock footage of the RAF flying formations in a darkened sky, before moving the narrative to the Polish pilots in England, the nostalgic melodrama of Greenberg and his friend bleeds into the buoyancy of war-effort propaganda.

When Greenberg recites Shylock for the last time, we find urgency re-inscribed in the lighthearted sadness of both previous scenes. Significantly, Dobosh, the producer who was overly serious at the beginning of the film, is now rehabilitated. He has again taken charge after the improvisations of his unruly troupe and their tampering with the script have gotten them all into dire straights. Having gathered together to figure out how to escape from Warsaw now that the Nazi command is onto their theatrical tricks, he is the one who comes up with the idea that they might revive the play *Murder in the Opera*. His sobriety, as he explains to them what they will be asked to play, is a synthesis between histrionic buoyancy and nostalgic sadness. Calmly, he anticipates the possibility of failure even as it is from this possibility that he draws his affective power. His assertion that the play might flop again, but that "we have to take the chance to get out of here" can be read as a coded message to the American audience in 1942 regarding the uncertainty of the outcome of the call to arms they have just embarked upon.

As Dobosh addresses Greenberg, who has assumed the pose of the melancholic, sitting apart from the other actors, the Jew willingly responds to his interpellation. Even at the acme of despair he maintains his spirit of comic relief. To Dobosh's suggestion, "if we can manage that Greenberg suddenly pops up among all those Nazis," he replies with his standard line: "it will get a tremendous laugh." The difference in repetition so seminal to comedy now adds a tone of gravity to mark the distance this troupe (and with it the film narrative) has covered since the audacious wit of the inaugural scene of *To Be or Not to Be*. This time, Dobosh's negation is sustained by compelling sincerity. Shaking his head, he counters Greenberg's suggestion by asserting, "No it won't." The comic ethos of Lubitsch resides in the fact that we are given both a lighthearted argument over the legitimacy of improvisation (with which the film began) and a producer's sober anticipation of a theatrical effect on which not only their lives but the survival of the Polish underground depend. Dobosh's appeal to Greenberg, "You've always wanted to play an important part. If you don't play it right, we're all lost, and if you do play it right, I still can't guarantee anything" is ominous and urgent. And it is an appeal that moves from the diegetic to the extradiegetic level of the film, appealing as much to the audience in front of the screen as to the actors on screen.

Reciting Shylock for the third time, Greenberg is re-energized both because he is finally able to do what he has been dreaming about and because, in realizing his narcissistic fantasy, he will be the one to make the difference. In the foyer behind the royal box in the opera house he once more recites Shylock for Bronski, only now the two actors are surrounded not only by their friends but also by real Nazis, taken in by the theatrical illusion. Pretending to be an assassin, asking what Hitler wants of Poland, he launches into a longer version of Shakespeare's monologue, with a medium shot focused on his outraged face as he declaims one last time, "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?" Only this time he adds the line, "if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?," at which point Tura (once more in the guise of a Nazi colonel) has him arrested by two of their fellow actors and led away to his alleged headquarters, while he convinces the bedazzled Nazis that he needs an escort to take himself and the Führer to the airport immediately. This time round Bronski remains completely silent, perfectly aligned with his role as Hitler.

After his fulminant performance, Greenberg, in turn, disappears from the screen. For a brief moment this subsidiary character has outplayed the "famous Polish actor" who, as the real Colonel Ehrhardt (Sig Ruman) had claimed, does to *Hamlet* what the Nazis are doing to Poland. Then the film narrative returns to Joseph Tura with his melodramatic excess. En route to the airport, he proudly discusses with Bronski how Greenberg had always wanted to play Shylock. The

question whether they will ever return to the Polski theater prompts yet another histrionic pose, even while recalling the nostalgic pathos of the scene between Greenberg and Bronski, shoveling snow in front of the theater. Then a bomb explodes and melancholia transforms into euphoria as the two Polish actors realize that the underground is still alive. If the point of staging Shylock in the foyer of the Warsaw opera was meant to subvert fascist politics with political theater, Lubitsch subverts this political pathos with another turn to the comic. While his two actors embark on the fantasy that a monument will be erected to them for having saved the underground, Bronski's discovery that Tura has lost his moustache makes the grandiose again ridiculous. In despair, the two vainglory heroes are reduced to looking for the false moustache in the upholstery of the car.

How might we evaluate these three citations? The question of appropriating a text which in Shakespeare's comedy involves accepting the injurious interpellation Venetian society attaches to the Jew is complex. Not only does an actor, who up to this point had primarily carried props on stage, become the lead actor in a scene where he challenges another actor, performing the part of Hitler. Not only is this a scene on which everyone's survival depends. Bressart is explicitly used for the part as a Jewish émigré actor in Hollywood, playing the one markedly Jewish member of the Polski theater, appropriating the role of the vengeful Jew so contested in the Shakespearean oeuvre. In this tautology he also plays the part against the grain. The politics of this theatrical space are such that while some actors are performing Nazis, he performs theater's most infamous Jew. Yet while the former masquerade thrives on the rhetorical gesture of satire, the latter is sustained by the dignity of ethical legitimacy. Lubitsch's Shylock is not the avenging figure of Shakespeare who seeks to redress the social prejudice he has suffered under, but rather an instance of salvation to whom the film makes such a forceful tribute, not least because Joseph Tura's vanity does not include him in the statue he imagines for himself while driving to the airport. This re-figured Shylock is the character we have unequivocal sympathy for, while Jack Benny's performance of Hamlet is self-consciously satiric. The joke, in part, consists in the visual discrepancy between the high tragedy of Shakespeare's character and Joseph Tura's hamming up Hamlet.

When Greenberg finally gets to deliver his performance of Shylock, having rehearsed it twice before, Bressart's performance is so engaging not only because, at this moment, the theatrical role and the real actor embodying it for the camera coincide, but also because this convergence dovetails with the ethico-political



Greenberg (Felix Bressart) as Shylock: "If you tickle us, do we not laugh?" *To Be or Not to Be*

attitude of the film *To Be or Not to Be*. Bressart as Greenberg as Shylock references Lubitsch himself, appealing—in the name of displaced European Jewry—to the American film audience, then as now. We never actually see him perform the part on stage. We are only given indications that this is something that might happen in the future, implicitly when the Nazi occupation of Poland will have ceased. If Lubitsch understood his comedy as part of Hollywood's war effort, the final rhetorical ploy consists in turning an identification with the anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew lusting for revenge into the right of the free world to retaliate against fascism. The bond Lubitsch's Shylock insists on—that is the ideological point of the film—is the pound of flesh the American forces, along with their allies, would be compelled to stake in their battle against the Nazis. In contrast to the court scene in Shakespeare's play, the contract which Lubitsch forges with his audience is precisely not concerned with *not* shedding a drop of blood. In 1942, America could only guess the extent of the bloodshed their recent entrance into the war would ultimately cost. Yet decisive in the appeal Greenberg *qua* Lubitsch makes, when their Shylock insists that the Jews/the Poles will also bleed if one pricks them, is simply the unequivocal legitimacy of a claim for an equally unambivalent political action.

### *Maria Has the Last Word*

Tracking the comic ethos of Lubitsch also means taking note of the fact that the film does not end with the successful flight of this troupe of actors from Poland. Instead, once they are safely installed in their airplane, en route to the British Isles, we are presented with a title card giving Scotland as the location of the next scene, followed by stock documentary footage of the resilient British anti-aircraft fire. This visual reference to the Battle of Britain functions as a chiasmic closure to the footage of bombed buildings in Warsaw in the transition sequence. Most poignant in these final sequences, however, is the manner in which, because Maria has the last word, we are also called upon to remember the earlier scene in the cellar, following the first air raid over Warsaw, and her comment regarding censorship.

As the film once more turns from anti-fascist adventure narrative to sophisticated romantic comedy, the battle of the sexes opens up again in all its force, exposing the gender antagonism which the presence of enemy occupation of Warsaw had tentatively put on hold. Having arrived in Scotland, Maria sheds her role of glamorous seductress and instead plays the part of the demure, subservient wife. When the journalists suggest that her husband "played the real hero in this amazing play," she does not contradict them. Instead, in response to their question as to what he would desire most, she slyly confesses: "He wants to play Hamlet." Almost shyly, her husband adds that they are, after all, in the country of Shakespeare, and once more she interrupts him, repeating that he wants to play Hamlet. Only apparently does she accept the subsidiary role he is assigning to her, claiming after the event that the contribution of the other actors to their amazing play with the Gestapo in Warsaw was very minor. The lap dissolve from Lombard's radiant and Benny's smug smile leads to the interior of a British theater. Joseph Tura once more appears on stage to deliver his monologue. For a brief moment he hesitates until his gaze can fix on Sobinski. We, literate in the logic of comedy, can only expect a repetition of the previous two scenes and so are surprised by the unexpected twist Lubitsch comes up with. The minute Tura beings to say "to be or not to be," a man does get up and leave the room, yet it is a perfect stranger.

The inclusion of this decisive difference leaves our ham literally speechless. All he can do is stare in horror at the off-space beyond the stage. Lubitsch won't even give him a close-up. For a few moments the camera remains with a frontal image of the actor, who has not only once again been interrupted in his most glamorous performance but also knows that at this very moment his wife is betraying him. Then the screen turns black. Maria is the final victor in this battle of the sexes, again deployed to screen out the real battle for Europe. She is once more pitting her seduction against her husband's vanity, and Lubitsch underscores her power by allowing his heroine to act from the off-space of the screen. Alone on stage, Joseph Tura may believe he commands the attention of his audience, but from behind the stage Maria is able to draw his attention, as well as ours, to her clandestine act of revenge. The last image may be his but she has the last word because, by virtue of the directions she has given to her lover, her husband will not be able to finish his monologue. We laugh at his helpless rage and can imagine her laughing with us, invisible to our gaze in her dressing room. This is, of course, our fantasy, since we don't see her in her triumph: a lighthearted counter-point to Greenberg's sinister disappearance from the screen.

The comic turn serves to introduce a final troubling rhetorical gesture. Who, we are left to ask ourselves, is in charge of this romantic game? The vain actor who continually ups the ante on his wife or the clever actress who can successfully entrap her husband because she knows jealousy to be his weakness? Maria has learned something from Greenberg's performance of Shylock. Power goes not to

the ham in the center of the stage, but to the one who, as an agent of interruption, draws attention to him or herself. With his dignified performance of Shylock, Greenberg refigures the generic war comedy by introducing into an adventurous comedy of errors the urgency to act in the name of preserving human rights. His absence from the end of the film makes this claim resound with immense force. Maria Tura's intervention also uses the force of the screen's off-space, of which we know that it triggers our imagination in a far more effective manner than anything shown on screen. Like Greenberg's silent disappearance, her insistence that her husband wants to play Hamlet tarries with us even after the screen has turned dark. Putting theater so suddenly on hold, her subterfuge continues to hold us. If nothing else, it spells trouble.

# *Lubitsch Can't Wait*

## *A Theoretical Examination*

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